

HEROES OF THE CHURCH: J. Gresham Machen



"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all." (Gal 1:6-7)

"False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the Gospel... What is today a matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires." - Dr. J. Gresham Machen, 1912 Princeton Seminary Opening Address, "Christianity and Culture"

I. Intellectual Shifts in the 18th-19th Centuries

- A. The "Enlightenment" of the 17th-18th centuries brought a real move away from all religious authority. Reason was crowned king, not the Bible. Christianity was judged in terms of its rationality.
- B. Darwin's evolutionary worldview applied to all of life. Everything is *naturally* (and violently) moving upward into a higher and more profound level of existence, apart from God's involvement in the world. (*Origin of the Species*, 1859)

"...excepting in the case of man himself, hardly anyone is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed."
- Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1871

- C. Utilitarianism ("what works for the most people") and pragmatism produces an efficient society, despite downsides (e.g., slavery, child labor, poor starvation).
- D. Industrial Revolution furthered notions of human ingenuity, mechanistic progress, urbanization.

Modernism (1750-1960) = "superiority of [human] reason as a guide to all knowledge and human concerns" (*Cambridge Encyclopedia*, 411).

Critical Question for the Church = How can Christianity be maintained in such a scientific age?

II. Modernist Answer: Treat the Bible like any other book!

- A. German "Higher Criticism" taught at all major university and seminaries
 1. The Bible is to be treated like any other book (not authoritative, contains some good/bad things)
 2. No possibility of the supernatural (i.e., no prophecies, miracles, divine Jesus, resurrection).
 3. The Bible's meaning is to be found through strict historical investigation.

Modernism Version of the Gospel – *"A God without wrath, who brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."*

- H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 1937

III. Machen's Preparation to Fight Theological Modernity/Liberalism

- A. Born to a prominent Baltimore family in 1881, reared in Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS).
- B. Educated at Johns Hopkins, thoroughly infused with progressive, industrial optimism.
- C. Went to Princeton Seminary at pastor's urging, then studied New Testament in Germany (1905-06)

"The first time I heard Herrmann may almost be described as an epoch in my life. Such an overpowering personality I think I almost never before encountered—overpowering in the sincerity of religious devotion... I have been thrown all into confusion by what he says—so much deeper is his devotion to Christ than anything I have known in myself during the past few years..." - Machen in a letter to his parents in 1905

- D. Returns to teach New Testament at Princeton Seminary from 1906 until 1929.
- E. Machen hears B.B. Warfield on Calvinism as full-orbed Biblical Christianity (1909).

IV. Machen's Fight: It's Either Christianity or Liberalism

- A. May 21, 1922 – Henry Emerson Fosdick preaches “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” at First Presbyterian Church, New York City, endorsing modernist view of Christianity.
- B. 1923 – Machen publishes *Christianity and Liberalism*.

“Liberalism on the one hand and the religion of the historic church on the other are not two varieties of the same religion, but two distinct religions proceeding from altogether separate roots.” – J.G. Machen, Christianity and Liberalism

- C. 1924 – Over 1200 ministers sign “Auburn Affirmation”, denying the Bible is inerrant, stating that the so-called “fundamental” doctrines were “theories”, not tests for ordination.
- D. 1929 – Princeton Seminary board reorganized. Machen departs with three other faculty members to form Westminster Theological Seminary to carry on “Old Princeton” tradition.
- E. 1934 – Machen forms the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in response to heretical teaching by missionaries and GA proposal for cooperation with other world religions.
- F. 1936 – Machen tried by church courts and de-frocked from the ministry. Machen founds the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936, six months before his death at 55.

V. Machen's Lessons for Us

- A. Be open, honest, clear, and straightforward in how you use religious and moral language. (e.g., “tolerance”, “community”, “love”)
- B. Exalt doctrine in a way that reveals its impact for life!
- C. Parents play a vital role in the spiritual development of their children.
- D. Indifference to key doctrines---saying “affirming or denying truth doesn't really matter...just leave doctrine aside”---is church-poisoning and soul-destroying.

VI. Further Reading

- A. Stephen J. Nichols, *J. Gresham Machen: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*
- B. David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, 2 vols.
- C. David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in a Postmodern World*
- D. Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, and Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*

“The fastest way to be out of date is to devote yourself to being up to date. Because in the twenty-first century, fashions are changing way faster than you can catch onto. And you will become one glib, trifling, superficial, ever-changing chameleon if you try consistently to be in sync with the times. But if you root yourself in the Creator of all times, and the triumphant Victor over all times, you will always bring to bear on all times a message that will be perpetually relevant and radically up to date; in fact, it will be so far ahead of the lagging-behind fashion makers that they won't be able to see it, except by the power of God working in their hearts.” – John Piper, “Building our Lives on the Bible”, off script.